

El Salvador: Limited Intervention Equals Limited Returns

A Monograph

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Abstract

El Salvador: Limited Intervention Equals Limited Returns, by MAJ Joseph C. Black, 46 pages.

The complexity of the current operational environment, coupled with the increasingly tightened US budget, creates undesirable tensions for the leaders of the United States and the free world. With one war in Afghanistan coming to a closure, instability in Iraq is re-emerging. Joining the enduring crisis in the Middle East and South-Central Asia, President Putin has made his way to the front of major news networks with his Russian world-view of Ukraine. The common theme among these events is that the United States sustains plenty of enemies across the globe, and the issue becomes how to deal with them. The likely answer, found among the policy makers and leaders on Capitol Hill, is to do more with less which reflects back to the early 1990s and the post-Gulf War. This monograph offers the perspective that attempting to do more with less does not work.

The purpose of this monograph is to analyze the misconception that using minimal means will produce anything other than minimal results. Using the single case study of the American military intervention in El Salvador in the 1980s, this monograph points to the evidence collected that underscores the results of a policy employing minimal means. Faced with a growing uneasiness coming out of the Vietnam War, the American public simply could not tolerate another war. Under these constraints, President Reagan and the American leadership operating within the diplomatic and military administrations attempted to utilize as minimal an effort required to quell the violence in El Salvador and prevent the spread of Soviet Communism.

This monograph analyzes the El Salvador crisis from beginning to end. The origins of the Salvadoran civil war help explain why a country as small and seemingly as insignificant as El Salvador actually mattered to the United States. The geographic location of El Salvador as well as the historical implications of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary dictate why the US cared. Additionally, the perceived threat of Communist expansion piqued the interest of American leadership and the global community. The United States felt that its hand was forced and responded with military and diplomatic measures due to the growing threat of an insurgent force funded by Soviet and Cuba Communists governments

The concluding sections serve as a cautionary tale of using limited means to achieve big results. The US sought major changes within El Salvador, but simply did not allocate the resources necessary to achieve that desired state. American policy makers and military leaders attempted to reform a system through military force and money, and it did not work. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War is what truly ushered in a peace settlement in El Salvador, not the blood and treasure from the United States.

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Introduction

We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means.¹ —Carl von Clausewitz, 1827

Who could have possibly predicted that a coffee exporting, third world country the size of Massachusetts would draw in the economic and military might of the United States for over a decade?² With the bitter memory of the Vietnam War lingering, United States policy makers and leaders faced the tough decision of whether to involve the United States in El Salvador.³ The thought of using the big stick of military force against a perceived aggressive communist action in Central America carried the weight of upsetting domestic and international allies of the United States.⁴

This monograph serves as a single study that underscores the results of employing limited means to achieve major results. If the United States learned one thing from the conflict intervention in El Salvador, it is the reality that minimal effort produces minimal results.⁵ President Reagan wanted to crush the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), and he wanted to do it with limited means.⁶ The outcome resulted in mixed results, as the resources were simply insufficiently allocated to the effort.⁷ The El Salvador crisis, a tale of a decade of poor decisions and failed foreign policies on behalf of the United

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. by Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87.

² Paul Ramshaw, *Intervention on Trial: The New York War Crimes Tribunal on Central America and the Caribbean* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 3.

³ Eugene R. Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1990), 181.

⁴ William G. Hyland, ed., *The Reagan Foreign Policy* (New York: Meridian, 1987), 40.

⁵ Stephen Watts and Christopher Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012), 57-58.

⁶ Bob Benning, *War in El Salvador: the Policies of President Reagan and the Lessons Learned for Today* (BiblioScholar, 2012), 15.

⁷ Watts and Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 88-89.

States, illustrated to the world that all of the economic and military might amounts to little if the leadership treads lightly.⁸

This monograph draws from the lessons learned in El Salvador, and highlights the notion that without a steadfast resolve moving forward in any conflict, American foreign policy will repeat its failures.⁹ While many experts suggest that limited military interventions offer the opportunity to secure US interests without the price tag of a larger nation-building mission, they frequently fail to account for or recognize the longevity required to defeat an insurgency or guerilla movement.¹⁰ History provides countless lessons of insurgent warfare and the time and effort needed to defeat such an organization.

The El Salvador intervention in the 1980s presents the perfect case study to analyze the ability of a world super power to defeat an insurgent force using minimal means. The military intervention in El Salvador proved that, “A made-in-the-USA counterinsurgency is unlikely to contain or roll back a genuine historical movement struggling for equity and independence.”¹¹ As Gabriel Kolko states, “War is not simply a conflict between armies; more and more it is a struggle between competing social systems incorporating the political, economic, and cultural institutions of all rivals.”¹² Another common narrative is that Americans typically fail to recognize and understand the context of a crisis because of cultural differences.

The debate over the potential use of minimalist military means to intervene is a fundamentally serious one. Future decisions concerning military interventions and the use of US military capabilities is

⁸ William M. LeoGrande, *A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador*. (International Security, 1981): 52.

⁹ Earl C Ravenal, *Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign Policy Failures* (Temple University Press, 1980), 3.

¹⁰ Watts and Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, xviii.

¹¹ Michael T. Klare, Peter Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 134.

¹² Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 5.

at stake each and every time. With disappointment from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflict spread across the diplomatic and military continuum, “The United States risks overlearning the lessons of these conflicts and stands to make the same mistakes in future conflicts.”¹³ The risk is that Afghanistan and Iraq will have the same effect on a future conflict that Vietnam had on the El Salvador military intervention.

The American population simply could not tolerate another war after the Vietnam experience, which resulted in the marginal outcome of the El Salvador military intervention.¹⁴ The concern is that just as the American leadership attempted to use minimal means in El Salvador because of the Vietnam War syndrome, America will venture down the same path following thirteen years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁵ El Salvador taught the people of the United States that a minimalist intervention achieves two main goals: a drained economy and political instability.¹⁶ The United States entered El Salvador half-heartedly thanks in part to post-Vietnam hang-over and the sober military assessment which concluded that America’s involvement in Central America was not a success.¹⁷

Thus, before undertaking future military endeavors, the first critical step is to make a serious effort to understand the nature of the conflict, particularly in distinguishing between the internal and external factors that contribute to understanding and appreciating the environmental complexities. Understanding the interaction between political and military dimensions is equally as important before

¹³ Watts and Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 2.

¹⁴ Steffen Schmidt, *El Salvador: America’s Next Vietnam?* (Salisbury: Documentary Publications, 1983), v.

¹⁵ Richard A. Melanson, *American Foreign Policy Since the Vietnam War: the Search for Consensus from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush*, 4th ed. (Armonk: Routledge, 2005), vii.

¹⁶ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 135.

¹⁷ Tammy Arbuckle, “Same Hardware, Same Tactics, Same Conclusion in El Salvador?,” *Armed Forces Journal International* 123 (1985), 50.

initiating the military intervention.¹⁸ Success in military interventions requires an understanding of the political competence and effectiveness of the state.¹⁹ In addition, it is important to consider whether the host nation is capable of meeting its responsibilities toward its society, particularly in providing security, and whether the adversary is effective in its quest for legitimacy.²⁰ It is also important to understand if the political body writ large perceives the current governing body as legitimate. For the United States, both the political leadership and the defense community must recognize that the solution cannot be found in efforts to scale down US goals with a reduction in resource requirements.²¹ The United States must revisit the history books from the El Salvador crisis and review the results of a half-hearted intervention effort.

Research Question

The primary research question this paper seeks to answer is what lessons can be learned through the study of the decisions which American policy makers made throughout the US military intervention in El Salvador in the 1980s. American policy makers and military leaders must understand that the application of limited means in military, diplomatic, and economic lines of effort often yields limited results. This monograph analyzes the El Salvadoran crisis against the FMLN from 1979–1991 and the American intervention through both political and military means.²² “The United States learned in Central America that predominant power was not an absolute, and a quick and minimal approach to conflict

¹⁸ Todd Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 18.

¹⁹ Jerry M. Sollinger et al., *Measuring National Power in the Post-Industrial Age* (Santa Monica: Rand Publishing, 2000), 133.

²⁰ Watts and Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 49-50.

²¹ Barbro A. Owens, *Military Power and Low Intensity Conflicts -- Can Lics (Low Intensity Conflict) Be Licked Without the Use of Threat or Force?* (PN, 1989), 12-13.

²² Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: the United States in Central America*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 17-18.

resolution was not in the realm of possibility, however desirable this might have been.”²³ American leaders and policy makers must resist the urge to marginalize the lessons learned throughout history, specifically the lessons learned from the El Salvador intervention.²⁴

Research Architecture

Despite the limitations of a single case study, the El Salvador military intervention contains a sufficient volume of data and resources necessary to argue the case against limited intervention policies.²⁵ Additionally, the available policy and defense literature clearly depict where the U.S. made potential policy, strategic, and military mistakes and the steps necessary to prevent a similar occurrence.

This monograph contains three sections. The first section introduces the origin of the El Salvador conflict, analyzing the revolutionary crisis that consumed El Salvador starting in the late 1970s.²⁶ Section one analyzes the historical background of the El Salvador crisis, providing the roadmap to the El Salvador Civil War and the significant factors which led to the conflict. Section one also underscores the significance of the geographical location of El Salvador and how the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary applied to the conflict raging inside the borders of Central America.²⁷ President Reagan felt the communist pressure and responded in kind through the application of historical documents that still carry

²³ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, x.

²⁴ Anne L. Clunan and Harold Trinkunas, *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternative to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Stewart Patrick, *Weak Links: Fragile States, Global Threats, and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁵ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 33.

²⁶ Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 1996), 17.

²⁷ Steffen Schmidt, *El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam?*, 15-16.

significant importance.²⁸ The first section provides additional analysis on the economic and political factors which contributed to the conflict, along with strategic factors of the revolution.²⁹ The last part of section one analyzes the rise of the FMLN as the opposition to the El Salvador ruling party.³⁰ Section one is important because it establishes the framework for United States' involvement in El Salvador, and explains why three United States Presidential administrations felt that US intervention was not only justified, but also necessary.³¹ Without a good understanding of the key issues of the conflict, one cannot effectively analyze the United States' participation and shortcomings throughout the crisis.³²

The second section provides an in-depth analysis of the United States' strategy and foreign policy of intervention in El Salvador. This section underscores the persistent multi-faceted conflict between 1979 and 1992. "Unlike the previous conflict in Vietnam, the United States focused less on directly influencing the tactical units in the field, and focused on a more balanced, 'Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational' (JIIM) approach, eventually working with the ministerial level of government to address the root causes of the insurgency."³³ Section two discusses the goal and strategy of the United States throughout the period of military intervention in El Salvador.

The third section provides a cautionary tale of using limited resources while expecting big results. The United States entered the El Salvador conflict with a half-hearted effort thanks in large part to the Vietnam War hang-over lingering over the country like a dark shadow.³⁴ Unfortunately, even though the

²⁸ Steffen Schmidt, *El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam?*, 125.

²⁹ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 17.

³⁰ Philip Russell, *El Salvador in Crisis* (Austin: Colorado River Press, 1984), 37-38; Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador*, 66.

³¹ William G. Hyland, ed., *The Reagan Foreign Policy*, 18-19.

³² Ravenal, *Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign Policy Failures*, 9-14.

³³ Schmidt, *El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam?*, 63.

³⁴ Ravenal, *Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign Policy Failures*, 3.

country consumed itself learning the lessons from the Vietnam War, policy makers and leaders once again allowed their decisions to be influenced by the same assumption that failed them in Vietnam.³⁵ The United States believed El Salvador would succumb to the rules and policies deemed appropriate by the United States.³⁶ Section three analyzes the source of American failure in El Salvador through three specific points. America had a vision for its intervention in El Salvador, but failed to allocate resources necessary to achieve the desired end state.³⁷ Secondly, the decision makers failed to account for the years of political violence within El Salvador.³⁸ Lastly, attempting to use American force to establish a democracy simply because America thought democracy was the appropriate system for El Salvador never left the starting gate.³⁹ The biggest source of frustration for the United States was its attempt to convert El Salvador into a democracy.⁴⁰ The major obstacle was El Salvador's heritage and historical context neither experienced nor supported a democratic society.⁴¹

The fourth and final section provides an analysis and conclusion of the American military intervention in El Salvador. The final section underscores the utility of limited military interventions and what should be anticipated as potential outcomes for this type of approach. Additionally, the last section

³⁵ Ravenal, *Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign Policy Failures*, 4-5

³⁶ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 163.

³⁷ Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: the Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp, 1992), 57.

³⁸ Thomas Davies and Brian Loveman, eds., *The Politics of Antipolitics: the Military in Latin America*, rev. ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 15.

³⁹ Martha L. Cottam, *Images and Intervention: U.S. Policies in Latin America* (New York: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), 129.

⁴⁰ Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*, v.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

provides an analysis on improving the probability of success and the implications for the US defense policy moving forward.

Origin of the El Salvador Crisis and Why It Matters

War is an instrument of policy. Wars must vary with the nature of their motives and the situations, which give rise to them.⁴² —Carl von Clausewitz, 1827

Every war has a beginning. El Salvador, the smallest and most densely populated country within Central America, witnessed the final confrontation between superpowers within the Third World.⁴³ The El Salvadoran conflict spans from the extermination of the early Amerindian tribes, to the social and economic domination of the peasant class by aristocratic landowners.⁴⁴ El Salvador is no stranger to conflict and struggle. “The very word in Spanish, *matanza*, culturally harkens the native Salvadoran to the peasant uprising of 1932 led by Agustin Farabundo Marti. The aristocratic paramilitary forces in the services of the wealthy landowners slaughtered an estimated 7,000 to 30,000 peasants, mainly Amerindians.”⁴⁵ The military controlled El Salvador with the support of the wealthy landowners from 1932 to 1992.⁴⁶ The military was able to retain power by cooperation and empowerment through coercive state control and was greatly assisted with the aid of police forces.⁴⁷ However, in an effort to keep control over the rising military power, the wealthy landowners created the ultra-conservative military force *Organizacion Democratica Nacionalista* (ORDEN).⁴⁸ Founded by General Jose Alberto Medrano and Colonel Roberto D’Aubuisson, ORDEN grew to a size ten times larger than the Salvadoran national army

⁴² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.

⁴³ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, Reprint ed., 1.

⁴⁴ Schmidt, *El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam?*, 32-35.

⁴⁵ Philip Russell, *El Salvador in Crisis*, 37-38; Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador*, 66.

⁴⁶ William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (New York: Temple University Press, 1996), 43.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Keen, Keith Haynes, and The College of Saint Rose, *A History of Latin America*, 9th ed. (New York: Cengage Learning, 2012), 466.

⁴⁸ Schmidt, *El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam?*, 63.

and was able to provide a cushion against leftists' insurgent activities, as well as counterbalance the peasant, farmers and communists' revolutionary organizations.⁴⁹ The established paramilitary organization kept military power in check and enforced total domination over the peasant class, especially during peasant uprisings fighting for land reforms.⁵⁰

What led to civil war in El Salvador? The primary causes of civil war in El Salvador were the result of three actions which occurred in the 1970s: first, the living conditions of the peasant class created an untenable situation that essentially laid the foundation for revolt.⁵¹ Second, "The social consciousness of many peasants were transformed by outside agents, not just particularly priests and religious activists but also teachers and students."⁵² Lastly, the peasant class demanded reforms of the failing economic and political policies.⁵³ In light of these three events, "Segments of the peasant class population organized into mass groups and demanded a system of reform; however, the Salvadoran government responded in kind with repression."⁵⁴ In sum, the systematic repression included the application of an economic system which completely marginalized the peasant class majority, and completely excluded peasant access to any forms of Salvadoran legal systems.⁵⁵ The aforementioned conditions exacerbated the necessary tensions for revolution and civil war.

El Salvador was no stranger to political revolution and warring parties. Using a system that primarily benefitted the "Fourteen Families," the wealthy land-owning families that controlled the

⁴⁹ Schmidt, *El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam?*, 63-64.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵¹ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Ramshaw, *Intervention On Trial: the New York War Crimes Tribunal On Central America and the Caribbean*, 7.

⁵⁵ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 27.

internal politics and economic flow, created tensions amongst the populace.⁵⁶ After years of repression and a worsening economy, the Salvadoran populace, particularly the peasant class, decided to stand up against the ruling party.⁵⁷ In response, the country's rulers and the military attempted to silence the cries for reform through political actions and military violence.⁵⁸

Peaceful demonstrations were crushed violently. Activists in all branches of the popular movement – religious professionals, lay parish leaders, student leaders, labor union activists, teachers, and other professionals – disappeared, were tortured and murdered. First directed against the activists themselves, the repression campaign quickly extended to their families and even their friends and associates. Whole families were slaughtered or driven into exile, immediately signaling the arrival of a bloody civil war.”⁵⁹

El Salvador has been completely consumed in a civil war since early 1980. Experts estimate the related violence caused over 70,000 deaths, devastated the economy and left the country scarred.⁶⁰ The civil war pitted the Salvadoran military against the guerrilla movement, and the FMLN. Witnessing the brutal destruction from the borders of the United States, leaders and policy makers determined the conflict raging inside of El Salvador was a low intensity conflict, although that title presumes the conflict was anything but brutal and extremely costly to the country.⁶¹ Analyzing the history of conflict within El Salvador, the economic disparity between the rich and poor, combined with the political oppression employed by the Salvadoran military created conditions favorable for civil war. Other than El Salvador set to implode like a time bomb, what was the strategic value for a United States intervention?

⁵⁶ Ramshaw, *Intervention On Trial: the New York War Crimes Tribunal On Central America and the Caribbean*, 7.

⁵⁷ Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador, the Face of Revolution* (New York: South End Press, 1999), 254.

⁵⁸ Ramshaw, *Intervention On Trial: the New York War Crimes Tribunal On Central America and the Caribbean*, 8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 347.

⁶¹ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 112.

Geographic Significance

Due to its geographical proximity to North America, Central America always held a place within the United States' sphere of influence, even though its smaller size and strategic value suggested otherwise. "The region was experiencing rapid growth and pressure to modernize when it became a cocktail of Cold War confrontation in the late 1970s."⁶² Nicaragua represented the first domino to fall in the sequence of socialists driven events. Led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), the armed guerilla movement overthrew former US ally and Dictator Anastasio Somoza in July 1979.⁶³ The armed insurrection quickly brought to light the involvement of Cuba and the Soviet Union. A State Department White Paper published in February 1981 offered definitive proof that the Soviet Union and Cuba were providing direct and indirect support to the armed insurrection in El Salvador.⁶⁴ The White Paper underscored the fact that this was yet another example of Communist powers manipulating smaller Third World countries in an attempt to exert influence across the globe.⁶⁵

Mounting tensions in El Salvador and the overwhelming influence of Communists regimes attempting to capitalize on the insurrection, Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig briefed members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on the major issue facing El Salvador, the United States and the global community:

Our most urgent objective is to stop the large flow of arms through Nicaragua into El Salvador. We consider what is happening as part of the global Communist campaign coordinated by Havana and Moscow to support the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador. The policy implications are already clear: First, the U.S. Government (USG) supports and will continue to support the present Government in El Salvador. We intend to work with

⁶² Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 6-7.

⁶³ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁴ Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: from Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 179.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

that Government with the objective of achieving social justice and stability in that strife-torn country. Second, the US government is convinced that neither stability nor social justice in El Salvador is possible as long as Communist subversion continues. Third, we will not remain passive in the face of this Communist challenge, a systematic, well-financed, sophisticated effort to impose a Communist regime in Central America.⁶⁶

With the rise of the FMLN through the support of Communist Soviet Union and Cuba, El Salvador rebels attempted to repeat the success of the Sandinista's in Nicaragua.⁶⁷ The FMLN adapted itself into a formidable guerilla force after a failed effort to rally support of the population for their cause.⁶⁸ With direct support from Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, the FMLN presented such a problem that the United States felt it could not stand idle.⁶⁹ William LeoGrande, author of the most comprehensive account of the US involvement in Central America, posed the question: "How could the United States have become so alarmed about such a small place?"⁷⁰ The answer though was quite simple and hinged on two factors: the Cold War and the Soviet Union.⁷¹

Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary

Although the crisis in El Salvador spanned the terms of three American Presidents with varying policy objectives and agendas, the Cold War strategy of global containment served to unify the American

⁶⁶ Marvin Gettleman, *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman (Boulder: Grove Press, 1987), 217.

⁶⁷ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 7.

⁶⁸ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 74-75.

⁶⁹ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 20.

⁷⁰ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: the United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 580.

⁷¹ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 20.

cause to rally against the uprisings in Central America.⁷² The three Presidents' strategic plans of action against the insurrection touched on the historical foundations established by the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary.⁷³ The Monroe Doctrine, from President Monroe's address to Congress in 1823, sought to protect the United States' rights and interests against any foreign aggression in Latin America.⁷⁴ Monroe declared that, "We should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to the United States peace and safety."⁷⁵ In addition to the Monroe Doctrine linkage, the Roosevelt Corollary explained Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations' fixation on Central America. Roosevelt created the Roosevelt Corollary as an extension to the Monroe Doctrine, stating that the United States would interfere with any foreign aggression attempting to forcibly assert itself within our hemisphere.⁷⁶

The Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary served to justify America's reaction to the Soviet aggression in Central America. The leadership of the United States viewed the communist's revolutionaries in El Salvador as a direct threat to the security and well-being of the United States.⁷⁷ The Soviet Union was deliberately pushing their agenda across the ocean into America's sphere of interest.⁷⁸ The resounding theme across the powerbrokers in the United States was that the insurrection in Central America mattered and that America needed to take notice. In response, the National Security Council stated:

⁷² Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 20-21.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁸ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 22.

...committed to defeating the Marxist-Leninists in Central America. We believe that should we fail to intervene on the current battlefields of El Salvador and Nicaragua, we shall have to face them in Mexico and on the canal where the stakes will be much higher.⁷⁹

Economic and Political Factors of Conflict

Combined with the need to rise to the occasion like their neighbors in Nicaragua, El Salvador's economic and political turmoil fostered an environment ripe for insurrection. Severe economic disparity existed between the rich and poor within El Salvador throughout its history. Wealthy landowners dominated the political and economic fronts. One staggering illustration of the concentration of wealth was that El Salvador had no middle class.⁸⁰ Approximately only 10% of the population owned land and the remainder fell into the extremely poor category.⁸¹

Another major factor contributing to the economic disparity was the reliance on coffee exports. Depending entirely on coffee as the sole major economic contributor spelled disaster for El Salvador.⁸² El Salvador suffered the consequences in 1969 when the world coffee prices plummeted, plunging El Salvador's economy into greater despair.⁸³ In addition to the economic crisis in El Salvador, the political situation did not ease any tensions between the government and the people.

The same ruling party that controlled the economic process also dictated and manipulated the tone of politics in El Salvador. A review of history reveals four ruling phases throughout its history: 1) economic elite control over the El Salvadoran Armed Forces, 2) complete military control of the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 18-22.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador*, 140-142.

⁸³ Terri Morrison and Wayne A. Conaway, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: the Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries*, 2nd ed. (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2006), 102.

government, 3) the provisional civil-military junta, and 4) military under democratic rule.⁸⁴ Elisabeth Wood notes that the El Salvador government consisted of “coalitions of economic elites and military hardliners defending labor-repressive institutions and practices until the civil war.”⁸⁵

The coalition of economic elites and military officials that Wood articulates worked to minimize uprisings; maintain stability within the country, and ensure order throughout El Salvador.⁸⁶ The ruling party employed the El Salvadoran Armed Forces as its security muscle to retain control of the population, which only created and exacerbated a situation of increased strife between the ruling class and the landless workers.⁸⁷ Essentially, the established political system served only the ruling party. This self-serving political and economic system lasted until the formation of the FMLN during the outbreak of the civil war in 1980. The dominance of the El Salvadoran Armed Forces combined with the ruling wealthy class oligarchy created a situation unsustainable by the population, thus ushering in the era of the FMLN.⁸⁸

The FMLN

October of 1980 witnessed the birth of the FMLN in El Salvador. United under Fidel Castro’s guidance, the FMLN consisted of five guerrilla organizations, which operated primarily in the capital and the northern mountainous region of El Salvador where the terrain made it difficult for the government

⁸⁴ Diego A Gantiva and Marco A Palacios, *The Peace Process of Colombia and El Salvador: A Comparative Study*. (Thesis, Monterey: Naval Post Graduate School, 1997).

⁸⁵ Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Forging Democracy from Below: Insurgent Transitions in South Africa and El Salvador* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁷ Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 176.

⁸⁸ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 62.

troops to gain access.⁸⁹ With the guidance and influence from Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union, the FMLN advocated a change in the Salvadoran government by force.⁹⁰ The five groups that formed to create the FMLN were: 1) the Communist Party of El Salvador, 2) Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), 3) the *Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), 4) *Resistencia Nacional* (RN), and 5) the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (PRTC).⁹¹ Although internal strife existed between the five disparate groups, Castro coordinated the unification of the five groups under the umbrella of the FMLN.⁹²

As underscored in her works, Tommie Sue Montgomery notes that the FMLN dedicated itself to the revolutionary struggle against the government of El Salvador to bring about reform and a change in decades of failed policy.⁹³ Employing a Marxist approach, the FMLN sought to remedy the perceived and actual socio-economic inequalities amongst the population.⁹⁴

In sum, the FMLN formed out of necessity due to the extreme disparity between the haves and have-nots and a failed political system. El Salvador's ruling class actions created the ideal climate for the revolution. The failed political policies, combined with the oppression from the El Salvadoran Armed Forces, served as the catalyst of a revolution.

Summary of the Origins of the El Salvador Crisis

⁸⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁹⁰ Linda Robinson, *Intervention or Neglect: the United States and Central America Beyond the 1980s* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1991), 97.

⁹¹ Gustavo Perdomo and David E. Spencer, *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran Fmln Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts* (New York: Praeger, 1995), 4.

⁹² Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, 131.

⁹³ Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, 110.

⁹⁴ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 33-35.

“The crisis that developed in El Salvador by the late 1970s had a variety of causes, all of which appear to have been necessary for social revolution to arise at that time.”⁹⁵ As discussed in section one, the unequal economic system and the impartial political system created the critical environment necessary for a revolution.⁹⁶ In addition to the political and economic crisis in El Salvador, factors such as the creation of the FMLN insurgency group also contributed to expediting the revolution and impending civil war. The revolutionary groups opted for armed conflict as opposed to working through the government in an effort to create reforms feasible for the entire population. The FMLN worked through the people, organizing mass uprisings of the peasant class and using military action to place stress on the political party.

The civil war in El Salvador featured a guerrilla movement utilizing military means with the voice of a united people to overthrow an oppressive government. As Central America locked itself in violent conflict across the continent, El Salvador essentially became the next state in line for violent revolution. Unfortunately, the country of El Salvador succumbed to its political, economic, and social problems. Segments of the Salvadoran people chose to take up arms against their government, consciously selecting armed rebellion to fight for control of their country.⁹⁷ As underscored in the first part of the introduction, several factors contributed to the inevitable civil war in El Salvador, and the resulting American intervention.

The geographic proximity of El Salvador to the United States and existing Communist nations, continued Soviet communist expansion, and the need to protect America’s interests all contributed to why the crisis in El Salvador mattered. American Policy makers felt that the United States had the right to

⁹⁵ James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (Verso Books, 1984), 60.

⁹⁶ Byrne, *El Salvador’s Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 33.

⁹⁷ Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 132.

intervene in El Salvador's affairs in the interests of US. President Reagan set the tone early with this message to Americans:

Too many have thought of Central America as just that place way down below Mexico that cannot possibly constitute a threat to our well-being... Central America's problems do directly affect the security and well-being of our own people. Central America is much closer to the United States than many of the world trouble spots that concern us... El Salvador is nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts.⁹⁸

El Salvador – The United States Engages the Problem

The support of the people is a measure of the insurgents' ability to control the people, whether through their willing cooperation or as the results of threats, acts of terrorism, or the physical occupation of their community. Thus, the insurgent need not possess the hearts and minds of the population, only the minds—the peoples' acquiescence, willing or unwilling, in the revolutionary cause.⁹⁹ —Andrew Krepinevich, 1986

This section of the monograph analyzes the United States' response to the crisis in El Salvador, the mission of soldiers and interagency personnel on the ground, and concludes with an analysis of the successes and failures of the United States' El Salvador foreign policy. While there is no dispute that the

⁹⁸ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 23.

⁹⁹ Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 9.

United States support to the government of El Salvador during their crisis played a critical role in ending the conflict and bringing about peace, the policy makers and leaders of the free world attempted to bring about peace within the shadow of the Vietnam War. The United States attempted to employ its global power and legitimacy while minimizing the costs associated with military intervention. According to Greentree, “The Vietnam legacy infected partisan politics and erupted as a great divide over Central America policy.”¹⁰⁰ America learned one lesson the hard way—that its power is not absolute and that no matter how fast the policy makers wanted the war to end, labeling the military intervention in El Salvador as limited did not equate to a quick end.¹⁰¹

United States’ Response

This section of the monograph analyzes the United States involvement in the El Salvador revolution, paying special attention to U.S. military assistance in the form of a limited intervention. The policy literature and history books available serve as a guide to describing America’s involvement within the conflict, and prove useful to future operational planners as they face the challenges of planning and executing a small-scale military intervention.

While the Salvadoran revolution began during President Carter’s administration, this monograph primarily focused on the conflict during President Reagan’s tenure. Upon assuming office, President Reagan faced a rapidly deteriorating situation in El Salvador. In keeping with the communist containment policy, President Reagan’s policy stance towards El Salvador consisted of one primary objective.¹⁰² “President Reagan made his primary objective the defeat of the Salvadoran FMLN.”¹⁰³ While hoping for the military defeat of the rebel forces, President Reagan and policy makers recognized that the problem

¹⁰⁰ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, ix.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 165.

¹⁰² Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, 1.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

within El Salvador was more than purely a military one.¹⁰⁴ The revolution, in essence, stems from the undemocratic policies and actions of the Salvadoran government.¹⁰⁵

Another challenge facing military planners and President Reagan was that military support to El Salvador would be initiated against the backdrop of the Vietnam War experience. As strategists faced the residual cognitive constraints from the withdrawal of Vietnam, one of the most important decisions made early was that the United States would not commit combat forces to the El Salvador conflict.¹⁰⁶ Leaders in Washington created the “Keep it simple, sustainable, small, and Salvadoran” principle to guide military involvement.¹⁰⁷

Boots on the Ground

America’s participation in the El Salvadoran Civil War started relatively slow at first. Colonel John Waghelstein, head of the US military group in El Salvador, was charged with leading the military efforts in El Salvador.¹⁰⁸ Following the policy objectives of President Reagan, Colonel Waghelstein’s strategy in El Salvador consisted of three components: train the Salvadoran military in counterinsurgency operations, implement a strategy to win the support of the population, and create a civilian government to replace the military rule.¹⁰⁹ As the commander of US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in 1987, General John Galvin told a conference on low-intensity warfare “there are many, many wars going on in

¹⁰⁴ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 20-21.

¹⁰⁵ Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 117.

¹⁰⁷ Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, 148.

¹⁰⁸ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

El Salvador, and we want to be fighting all of them.”¹¹⁰ El Salvador, located in SOUTHCOMs Area of Responsibility (AOR), quickly became the problem of General Galvin.¹¹¹ One of the major challenges facing the SOUTHCOM commander and the American government was the public and international publicity on human rights violations by the Government of El Salvador, a highly politicized and fractured El Salvador government, and the American anti-war sentiment encapsulated in the phrase ‘Vietnam Syndrome’.¹¹² In response to this challenge, President Reagan and the United States initiated a two-fold policy in support of the El Salvadoran government. First, bolster the Salvadoran armed forces to wear down the rebels, and second, support the El Salvador government in an attempt to delegitimize the rebels.¹¹³ The United States planned to accomplish the first policy goal with military aid and the second goal through economic aid and political pressure.¹¹⁴

In addition to military support provided to El Salvador, the United States poured over six billion dollars in total aid to the Salvadoran government from 1980-1989.¹¹⁵ The extremely high price tag provided for new equipment and training for the Salvadoran armed forces. Simultaneous actions with the financial support provided to El Salvador, the United States limited its involvement in the conflict by restricting the American ground troop presence to 55 total soldiers.¹¹⁶ While the number of troops was set at 55 by the US administration, the number 55 was actually twice that amount on any given day due to

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 112-113.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 112.

¹¹² Ibid., 112-113.

¹¹³ Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*, v.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., xiii.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁶ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 116-117.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other inter-agency advisors.¹¹⁷ “Pentagon advisors offered observations and suggestions to the Salvadoran high command on operations, planning, coordination, and control of major combat operations.”¹¹⁸ In addition to the ground troops advising the Salvadoran troops, the advisor teams were augmented with at least 150 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents that conducted a wide variety of intelligence and psychological operations.¹¹⁹

The troops served under the title of “advisor,” as a role in an effort to downplay the use of combat forces on foreign soil.¹²⁰ The role of the advisors was to provide general military and counterinsurgency training to the Salvadoran military.¹²¹ The training focused on two primary objectives. The first objective was to train the Salvadoran Army to effectively employ the new equipment and to become proficient at basic combat skills, and the second objective focused on the importance of human rights.¹²²

The training and economic support provided by the United States allowed the Salvadoran Army to expand from a small force of 12,000 in the early 1980s to approximately 60,000 by 1986.¹²³ United States Special Forces conducted a majority of the training, although the support provided by the United States consisted of multiple branches across all military services. Through persistent support of the United States and the continued improvement of the Salvadoran Army, the rebels were never able to defeat the Army. This fact directly contributed to the eventual peace settlement agreed upon in 1992.¹²⁴

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 117.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador*, 2-3.

¹²⁴ Kevin Murray, *El Salvador: Peace On Trial* (Oxford, UK.: Oxfam Publishing, 1997), 3.

The evolution of U.S. support in the El Salvador conflict had many constraints placed on it. The primary constraint was the total number of troops provided to address the conflict. The American Government went so far as to claim that the troops were not combat forces, but rather, advisors serving in a purely supporting role. The advisors worked under two restrictions. The first was the limitations on the functions the advisors could perform, and the second was limited funding.¹²⁵ In addition to the American restrictions placed on the American advisors, the El Salvador Government placed restrictions on the supporting forces as well. The most serious restriction was the ability and willingness of the Salvadoran armed forces to follow American training and instructions.¹²⁶ The frustrations centered on the fact that the Salvadoran military operated on a “nine-to-five, five-day-a-week schedule, and viewed themselves as a garrison bound military.”¹²⁷

In the end, the “Vietnam Syndrome” was merely just one facet of the conflict that placed constraints on the America’s involvement in El Salvador. America’s recent history in Vietnam framed the strategic environment wherein the United States found itself postured. The leadership of the United States faced a number of strategic crises during this period: the Iran hostage situation; the failed Desert One rescue attempt in Iran; the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan; communist insurgencies and governments in Cuba, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Columbia, and Nicaragua; Communist overtures toward Angola, Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Laos, and; firebombing of American embassies in Libya and Pakistan.¹²⁸

Analysis

¹²⁵ Andrew Bacevich, James Hallums, Richard White, and Thomas Young. *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988), 13.

¹²⁶ Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Army's Role in Counterinsurgency and Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA., 1990), 12-13.

¹²⁷ Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*, 17.

¹²⁸ Schmidt, *El Salvador*, 15-16, 89; Bacevich, et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars*, 3-4.

For the United States and President Reagan, the intervention in the El Salvador Civil War was a “line in the sand” against Communist expansion.¹²⁹ President Reagan stated three objectives prior to US involvement in El Salvador; 1) defeat the FMLN; 2) strengthen democratic principles; and 3) achieve a broad-based socioeconomic development. The US struggled to achieve any of the three stated objectives.¹³⁰ This section of the monograph will expand on America’s involvement in the revolution, and analyze the role that the American military instrument of power complemented in supporting the El Salvadoran government throughout the conflict.

The El Salvador military intervention alone did not secure outright victory, but essentially prevented the defeat of the Salvadoran government by the insurgent FMLN. Though not as quickly as President Reagan wanted, the reformation of the political system within El Salvador created better conditions for conflict termination than did the military efforts of the United States advisors.¹³¹ Reforming the Salvadoran military increased their capacity and capability to prevent the communist FMLN from blatantly overrunning the seat of government.

Analysis of America’s involvement in the Salvadoran insurgency underscores three lessons of limited military interventions. First, although the intervention did not destroy the FMLN insurgency, the military intervention created a stalemate between the Salvadoran Government and the FMLN. This stalemate brought about the negotiated settlement in 1992.¹³² Both parties recognized that neither was strong enough to defeat the opposing forces, thus paving the way for the peace agreement. The peace accords stated four major goals to achieve as a mechanism for conflict termination. “These were: stop the

¹²⁹ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 20.

¹³⁰ Michael Childress, *The Effectiveness of U.S. Training Efforts in Internal Defense and Development: The Cases of El Salvador and Honduras* (Santa Monica, CA., 1995), 18.

¹³¹ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 160-162.

¹³² Ibid., 155-156.

war through political means; achieve a prolonged democracy in the country; guaranteeing the respect of human rights; and, the reunification of Salvadoran society.”¹³³

Second, the loss of the funding that supported both the FMLN and the Salvadoran Government created a need to end the conflict. The collapse of the socialist blocs in conjunction with the end of the Cold War essentially ended FMLN’s funding source and materiel support. The Salvadoran government’s loss of U.S. financial support against the FMLN expedited the need to settle.¹³⁴

Lastly, the supported nations frequently adopt the conventional tactics of the supporting nation, even if it is against an insurgent force.¹³⁵ As seen in El Salvador, the United States training and advising mission improved the overall professionalism and skill set of the Salvadoran forces. The train and advise mission was marginal in their attempt to transform the Salvadoran forces into an efficient counterinsurgency force.¹³⁶

In sum, the El Salvador case study suggests that while limited military interventions may stave off defeat, they seldom are capable of securing outright victory.¹³⁷ First, limited military interventions strengthen supported forces; however, the supporting force is seldom capable of transforming the supported force into a highly trained counterinsurgency force.¹³⁸ This weakness is typically a result of insufficient support from the host nations’ own government. Secondly, while focused on the military

¹³³ Ruben Oswaldo Rubio-Reyes, *The United Nations and Peace Operations in El Salvador*, (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College, 2000), 16.

¹³⁴ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 147-148.

¹³⁵ Daniel L. Byman, *Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism*, *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Fall 2006, 90.

¹³⁶ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 116.

¹³⁷ Watts and Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 86.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

effort, limited military interventions rarely achieve governmental success.¹³⁹ The minimalist approach simply fails to provide sufficient capabilities to improve local governance.

Cautionary Tale: Limited Means Produce Limited Results

We Americans should be proud of what we are trying to do in Central America, and proud of what, together with our friends, we can do in Central America, to support democracy, human rights, and economic growth, while preserving peace so close to home. Let us show the world that we want no hostile, communist colonies here in the Americas: South, Central, or North.¹⁴⁰ —
Ronald Reagan, May 1984

The third section of this monograph analyzes the results of the United States' intervention in El Salvador. This section serves as a cautionary tale of using limited means expecting big results. The United States determined that El Salvador's Civil War necessitated American intervention, however, the decision makers wanted to address the effort as cost-efficient and as least intrusive as possible. As Greentree mentions in *Crossroads of Intervention*, "The issue is not whether values have a part in America's pursuit of its interests – they are in fact inextricable – but how they should be balanced? Size and power have allowed the United States to absorb blunders and folly more easily than the less endowed nations who have been the subjects of its interventions."¹⁴¹ However, these lessons learned do not seek to restrict the

¹³⁹ Watts and Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 56.

¹⁴⁰ Mayra Gomez, *Human Rights in Cuba, El Salvador and Nicaragua: a Sociological Perspective on Human Rights Abuse* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 190.

¹⁴¹ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, x.

United States' ability to intervene when appropriate. The loss in Vietnam constrained the United States to the point where decision makers feared escalating the number of troops sent into El Salvador. The military intervention in El Salvador failed because the United States entered the conflict with a limited objective. The United States fell short because policy makers and military strategists failed to understand and appreciate the socioeconomic environment of the conflict area, the adversary's strategy, and the relationship of the political violence to other violence.¹⁴²

This section analyzes three components of America's shortcomings in El Salvador. The first is the lack of resources allocated to support the vision of the United States. What exactly was the United States trying to accomplish and were they employing all of the means necessary to achieve the desired ends? The second point is the failure of the United States to recognize the enduring political violence throughout El Salvador. The final point underscores the downfall of the entire intervention; attempting to create a vibrant democracy in a country that has never supported, much less experienced the concept of a liberal democracy.¹⁴³

Vision without Resources

If the intervention in El Salvador is considered a success, it is hardly celebrated as a major victory and it certainly bears a truth about attempting to use limited means to achieve major results in a war, even if it is a small war. Towards the end of the conflict in El Salvador in 1989, a high-ranking Salvadoran official stated that the United States wanted to achieve three things in his country: some semblance of peace, human rights for everyone, and an established democratic process.¹⁴⁴ He concluded his comment

¹⁴² Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 100-20 *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), 3.

¹⁴³ Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 199.

¹⁴⁴ Brook Larmer, "Extremists Gain the Upper Hand," *The Christian Science Monitor*, accessed December 16, 2014, November 20, 1989, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1989/1120/olar.html>.

with a strong statement, America failed.¹⁴⁵ While most officials within the United States did not agree with his assessment of America's objectives in El Salvador, one thing is very apparent. American policy makers had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve in El Salvador, but failed to apply sufficient and appropriate means necessary to achieve the desired end state.

The first piece of the puzzle was the intervention imperative and the United States' national interests within Central America, specifically El Salvador. What exactly was at stake and was the country united with its efforts towards a military intervention? The country was split on whether or not it should intervene in El Salvador, especially considering how small the country was and the impacts of intervention on the United States.¹⁴⁶ In the end, Soviet Union involvement forced the United States hand towards intervening in El Salvador.¹⁴⁷

As stated by Clausewitz, "the conclusions can be no more wholly objective than in any other war."¹⁴⁸ Policy, he claimed, "is representative of all interests of the community, and will be shaped by the qualities of mind and character of leaders, and more generally by the natures of states and societies according to the times and political conditions."¹⁴⁹ Instead of setting policy objectives for El Salvador from the outset, the United States witnessed the military intervention span three very different and distinct presidents. Each president provided different ideas and policies on what should and should not happen in El Salvador. Setting a strategic and national policy objective for El Salvador proved impossible with changes in leadership and an ever-changing Congress. "There were divisions among liberals and conservatives, realists and idealists, or to distinguish further, among neo-internationalists,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 20-23.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 586, 606.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

neoconservatives, and neo-realists.”¹⁵⁰ In sum, each political party had its own agenda towards intervention in Central America. The biggest question in Washington revolved not around where to draw the line against the communist’s aggression in Central America, but more importantly, whether America needed to draw a line at all.

The next point of contention with the military intervention in El Salvador revolved around a lack of means to achieve the desired end. President Reagan repeatedly stated that he did not intend to send American troops into El Salvador, with questions surfacing about El Salvador becoming America’s next Vietnam War. However, this created a situation which restricted the President and his staff with regards to the means available to push back the Soviet aggression in Central America. In the same sense, Robert Osgood spoke about Korea:

The generally accepted definition of limited war that emerged in the West in the 1950s limited both the means and the ends of war. Limited wars were to be fought for ends far short of the complete subordination of one state’s will to another’s, using means that involve far less than the total military resources of the belligerents and leave the civilian life and armed forces of the belligerents largely intact. Limited war is not only a matter of degree but also a matter of national perspective – a local war that is limited from the standpoint of external participants might be total war from the standpoint of the local belligerents.¹⁵¹

Ever fearful of being labeled as a warmonger, President Reagan limited both the aims and means available for use in El Salvador.¹⁵² Beyond simply stating that the United States would not send combat forces into Central America, Congress imposed several other limitations on the intervention that included limitations on force levels, commitments, and resources available. “The intent of the restrictions on US

¹⁵⁰ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 20-21.

¹⁵¹ Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Boulder: Westview Pr (Short Disc), 1979), 3.

¹⁵² Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 33.

involvement was to keep these wars ‘humane’ and emphasize diplomacy, without Congress bearing responsibility for abandoning Central America altogether.”¹⁵³

The United States limited the total number of troops in El Salvador to fifty-five.¹⁵⁴ The significance of setting the number at fifty-five was an effort to minimize the United States ability to escalate the conflict. Along with the restrictions on troop involvement, the United States Congress placed a severe limitation on spending. The budget limitations restricted the Department of Defense and the interagency community on what could be reasonably achieved in Central America. Essentially, the restrictions on troops and money had consequences on capabilities. Restraining expenditures in El Salvador created an easy out for the United States. The amount of financial support provided to El Salvador created a scenario that the United States felt it could withdraw at any time and an operational loss would not affect the balance of global power for the United States.¹⁵⁵

Political Violence

Combined with restrictions on personnel and money, the limited American success in El Salvador resulted from a failed attempt to unite the multiple political parties in El Salvador. The United States hoped that through a unification process of political parties, the need for political violence would be reduced and ultimately result in peaceful resolution and governance. Unfortunately, democratization requires a system for the alienated “left” to be absorbed into the standing political system. Unfortunately, El Salvador ranked as one of the most dangerous country in the world, and as long as this remained a fact, there was no room for moderate or political “left” parties to help form any nucleus of a stable political

¹⁵³ Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: the Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 137.

¹⁵⁴ Klare, Kornbluh, and editors, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, 117.

¹⁵⁵ Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 38-41.

system.¹⁵⁶ The United States viewed democratization as a piece of the puzzle required for success in Central America. “While democratization is perceived as the means to redress the population’s legitimate grievances, those very grievances – lawlessness, disappearances, political killings and arbitrary arrests, inhibited democratization.”¹⁵⁷

Democracy

As a final point in the cautionary tale of the United States’ involvement in El Salvador was its failed attempt at creating a state of democracy. What the United States failed to realize was that the Salvadoran population did not want a democracy. As the United States searched for a political center within El Salvador, including El Salvador’s bureaucrats, office workers, labor organizers, professionals, politicians, priests, and progressive military officers, the military and death squads’ sustained killing spree essentially ended the chance for a stable government.¹⁵⁸ In its support of the fight against the FMLN, the United States watched as El Salvador completely rejected the idea of a democracy. “In El Salvador, a rigidly authoritarian liberation movement remained locked in a life-or-death struggle with a reactionary right animated by the most virulent anti-leftists sentiment in Latin America.”¹⁵⁹

“Centuries of feudal repression, the right wing’s profound fear of reform, the peasantry’s deep suspicion of the government and armed forces, and the terrible normalcy of violence in a country wracked by a decade of bloody civil war have all served to lock El Salvador firmly in the embrace of mutual enmity.”¹⁶⁰ As James LeMoyne points out, El Salvador is the Northern Ireland of Central America:

¹⁵⁶ Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 112-113.

¹⁵⁷ Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*, 62.

¹⁵⁸ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: the United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Susan Eva Eckstein and Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, eds., *Struggles for Social Rights in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 520.

¹⁶⁰ Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*, 66.

incapable of reform without dramatic measures.¹⁶¹ Despite America's best efforts, El Salvador remained pitted in a bloody revolution incapable of change. American leadership desperately wanted some form of democracy to take hold in El Salvador, but El Salvador had other plans.

Analysis

When the United States made the decision to intervene in El Salvador, it was driven by the Cold War and the Monroe Doctrine, but without the realization that the intervention would span three American Presidents and last over a decade. The one thing all three of the Presidents had in common was they all chose to adhere to the limited resources principle throughout the conflict in El Salvador, thus producing a matched level of results.

The capacity of the United States to wage military intervention in Central America was never in question. The restrictions placed on the intervention, not the capability of the United States, ultimately proved to be the limiting factor in the military intervention. Writing from El Salvador in October 1988, reporter Brook Larmer stated, "Nearly everyone here, from conservative Army colonels to leftist political leaders, openly criticizes the US 'project,' questioning whether it can produce genuine change or end the war."¹⁶² Despite the hopes that limited intervention would produce big results, a decade of frustration and small progress proved otherwise.

¹⁶¹ James LeMoyne, "*The Guns of El Salvador*," The New York Times, accessed November 1, 2014, February 5, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/05/magazine/the-guns-of-slavador.html>.

¹⁶² Brook Larmer, "Backsliding to the bad old days," The Christian Science Monitor, accessed December 16, 2014, October 19, 1988, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1988/1019/zsal1.html>.

Analysis and Conclusion

Learn all you can.... Get to know their families, clans and tribes, friends and enemies, wells, hills and roads. Do all this by listening and by indirect inquiry. ... Get to speak their dialect ... not yours. Until you can understand their allusions, avoid getting deep into conversation or you will drop bricks.¹⁶³ —T.E. Lawrence, 1917

The evolution of this monograph began with illuminating the origins of the Salvadoran Civil War. The first segment set the stage for the United States military intervention in El Salvador. Section one underscored the origins of the Salvadoran crisis, expanding on the political and economic unrest, and the brutal regime that controlled the country through deliberately calculated military violence. Section two explored the United States involvement in El Salvador, highlighting America's desire to pursue limited intervention methods. Section three discussed the cautionary tale of using limited means and expecting big results. The section focused on America's lack of resources necessary to achieve the desired end state and the inability to establish a democracy illustrates the critical pitfalls of America's involvement in Central America. Policy makers attempted to employ a limited military intervention approach in El Salvador. However, the research showed that a minimalist approach produced limited results. This final

¹⁶³ T. E. Lawrence, "27 Articles," *T.E. Lawrence Studies*, accessed November 9, 2014, August 20, 1917, http://www.telstudies.org/writings/works/articles_essays/1917_twenty-seven_articles.shtm.

section of the monograph provides a concluding synthesis on limited military interventions and a potential roadmap for future operational planners faced with the minimalist dilemma.

Just as the United States failed to negotiate any settlement with the Taliban after its subsequent collapse in 2002 or to commit a large presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, policymakers and military leaders of the United States made a similar mistake during the El Salvadoran Civil War.¹⁶⁴ Throughout history, leaders of all supporting states consistently overestimate their chances for success.¹⁶⁵ The conclusion provided in the section provides three answers. The first is the value of limited military interventions. The second is how to improve the chances of strategic success, and finally, the US defense policy implications of such a strategy.

Value of Limited Military Interventions

While the minimalist approach may only avoid defeat, that may be sufficient to secure the objectives of the United States. In El Salvador, the greatest concern was the fall of another Central American country to Communist expansionism. In essence, even though the United States failed to end the violence and to bolster the supported government, the US achieved its goal of preventing a Communist takeover in El Salvador.¹⁶⁶ However, at what cost? As quoted from a former Ambassador to El Salvador, “We say we are here to fortify democracy, but we could be doing that forever.”¹⁶⁷ Essentially, El Salvador was incapable of governing itself, thus justified the need for American intervention. Lastly, while American support helped to eliminate some of the pretentious problems in El

¹⁶⁴ Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, Washington, D.C., (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009).

¹⁶⁵ Ariel E. Levite, Bruce W. Jentleson, and Larry Berman, *Foreign Military Intervention: The Dynamics of Protracted Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

¹⁶⁶ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 159.

¹⁶⁷ James LeMoyne, “The Guns of El Salvador,” *The New York Times*, accessed November 1, 2014, February 5, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/05/magazine/the-guns-of-slavador.html>.

Salvador, the armed forces remained incompetent, the idea of a stable political system remained untenable, and the people of El Salvador simply refused change.

Improving the Probability of Success

Improving the chances of operational and strategic success in a limited military intervention comes down to three means in which an operational planner must carefully chose: the circumstances that drive the initiation of the intervention, combining both military and non-military instruments to the intervention, and committing to stabilizing the eventual peace.¹⁶⁸

The answer lies in the strengths and weaknesses of both the supported government and the insurgency. Chances of success through limited military interventions prove more successful if both parties are weak. Lastly, a scaled approach may also prove successful if a negotiated settlement between the government and insurgency is viable but simply needs an outside power to help negotiate.¹⁶⁹

The second objective is to combine both military and non-military instruments to the intervention. Ending an insurgency typically requires a diplomatic process in which the insurgent forces are able to secure their core interests through a settlement. Unfortunately, the diplomatic process is often left out until considerable bloodshed occurs. Lastly, odds of improving the outcome of a small-scale intervention may be improved through a long-term commitment of the supported government. Policymakers must realize that the end of violence does not signal the end of the stabilization mission.¹⁷⁰

Implications for US Defense Policy

Limited military interventions provide the United States with a reasonable chance of success in future conflicts without the commitment of mass troops and equipment. The operational planner must

¹⁶⁸ Watts, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 88.

¹⁶⁹ Watts, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 89.

¹⁷⁰ Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

determine if a scaled approach is the preferred tool to realize the US foreign policy goal. Essentially, planners may determine that the scaled approach is the “least-bad” option.

As the Army faces reduction in force structure and a fiscally restrained environment, leaders must place an emphasis on preparing for the uncertainties. Policymakers and military leaders must make tough decisions regarding what equipment, programs stay, and which ones must go. Additionally, Army officials must capture the lessons learned of thirteen years of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. The leaders of the United States must take and apply the lessons learned towards a tangible foreign and national policy moving forward. The answer may not always lie within a limited approach as a solution, but when the time is right for that approach. The operational artist needs to come equipped with the necessary tools to achieve durable success. Politics, external world events, and a myriad of other factors will determine whether the United States finds itself in another war. While that role is undetermined, the fact that insurgencies remain active across the globe is a steadfast reality, and as is the current case, the United States will likely play either a direct or an indirect role in those situations.

The United States remained engaged in a bloody and seemingly never-ending civil war in El Salvador for twelve years.¹⁷¹ The brutal truth is that while the United States military and economic support aided the Salvadoran people, it was not sufficient enough to tip the scales in favor of a pro-democracy.¹⁷² Analysis points to the combination of a military stalemate and the eventual end to the Cold War that brought about a peace accord in El Salvador.

Using El Salvador as a case study to explore the implications of limited interventions, this monograph identified some general principles that one must apply in future military endeavors. The first critical factor is the supported government must be willing to address the cause of its instability. The

¹⁷¹ Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, 162.

¹⁷² Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*, 65-66.

second major point is that the indigenous people of the supported country must support the military intervention. Simply defeating the insurgency is not the ultimate solution. The goal is to turn the local population against the revolution and create an environment untenable for the revolutionary party. The third and arguably most important factor is to ensure the limited intervention policy includes the synergy of political and economic aspects and not just pure military power.

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